

Memorandum

To : The Conservancy
The Advisory Committee

Date: November 26, 2007

From :  Joseph T. Edmiston, FAICP, Hon. ASLA, Executive Director

Subject: **Agenda Item 8 (c): Consideration of resolution authorizing a comment letter to the Conejo Recreation and Park District regarding public access improvements at the MRCA-owned Rancho Potrero Open Space.**

Staff Recommendation: That the Conservancy adopt the attached resolution authorizing comment to an intergovernmental committee meeting of the Conejo Recreation and Park District and the City of Thousand Oaks regarding planning for public access improvements at the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA)-owned Rancho Potrero Open Space in Thousand Oaks.

Legislative Authority: Section 33211(c) of the Public Resources Code.

Background: On December 5, a joint meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee of Conejo Recreation and Park District and the City of Thousand Oaks will be held to provide comment and direction on plans for public access improvements to the Rancho Potrero Open Space. This approximately-326 acre property is owned by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority and is located on the southwestern unincorporated edge of the City, adjacent to the National Park Service parkland including Rancho Sierra Vista. Staff was requested at the October 29 Conservancy meeting to provide comments for the meeting and input to the development of any conceptual plans.

The property in question has been the subject of a series of intense local controversies for decades, dating back to its days as a private horse breeding ranch whose owner was murdered; to private development plans including a 5000-unit “senior citizen village” and later large lot estates, and even preliminary consideration as a site for a state prison. Further controversies swirled over park acquisition attempts, expectations of publicly-owned horse stables and publicly-owned golf course; then more *sturm und drang* over the fate and location of a decade-long “temporary” horse stable operation. Since the parkland was acquired in 1993, the massive Dos Vientos Ranch development has been largely completed, so there are now homes immediately to the north of Potrero Road. And, ironically, there is now local question on how

the public at large can best enjoy the significant parkland investment for typical open space passive uses such as picnicking and outdoor education day camps while still maintaining open space parkland values. Neighbor concerns about lights, parties, crime, traffic are not new to any park planner, but appropriate design, park management, and attention to environmental constraints are expected from park professionals.

In 1993, the MRCA purchased the nearly 640-acre George Paterias Huck property, a portion of the original Broome Ranch holdings, for \$4.2 million on behalf of itself, the Conservancy, the City of Thousand Oaks, the Conejo Recreation and Park District, and the National Park Service. Funding was provided by all the entities. The City contributed \$1 million, and the Park District provided \$1.9 million. MRCA and the Conservancy provided the rest of the funds but later carved out a 312 acre portion for the National Park Service's fee acquisition as an addition to Rancho Sierra Vista. The operating assumption has always been that the joint powers Conejo Open Space Conservation Agency would manage the remaining acreage and eventually take title.

Community meetings with equestrians some years ago provided input to site horse and park facilities on the existing barn and trailer pads for the old Huck Olympia Farms site, hidden from view of the Dos Vientos neighbors, and possibly reusing timbers donated from the historic Dos Vientos Barn, which had to be dismantled to make way for the Dos Vientos development.

The Olympia Farms site then fell from favor after new community involvement, and three years ago the 20-acre portion of the property along Potrero Road transferred from MRCA to COSCA and the City for an equestrian operation recently awarded to Circle K, a private operator under a sublease with the City, which replaces the former 'temporary' Two Winds Ranch. The flat land all along Potrero Road was a former barley field.

The original intent for the City and the District's participation was to preserve the property from development and to provide for protection of open space and appropriate recreational opportunities; an intent shared by all the parties in interest.

The Park District and a community focus group has been working to develop concepts, and to address vocal concerns about inappropriate uses, parking, a "corporate party pavilion," and consistency with park plans and values. The current discussion on where to site trailhead parking, how much parking to accommodate, shade structures, tree-planting, interpretive signage, and picnic tables, for example, is to be further elucidated at the December 5 Inter Governmental meeting.

COSCA prepared an environmental constraints analysis some years ago to identify sensitive

areas to be protected. Trailhead parking should be provided in one or more locations. At this time , unless one is boarding or renting a horse at the Circle K Stables and able to park there, there is no onsite parking for trail users, and only a narrow shoulder along Potrero. (Neighboring homeowners can walk or ride in). Shade structures, picnic tables, water, and accessible features can enhance open space programs, such as day camp trips, by park district outdoor recreation staff and community groups. Existing trails were established to avoid sensitive plant locations. Wildlife-porous fencing, removal of any old barbed wire fencing, minimizing or abjuring any night-lighting are additional elements that should be considered. Any new improvement features must also be compatible with the Army Corps of Engineers wetlands easement granted by MRCA.